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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether positive response to humor in a speech would enhance audience evaluation of the speech/speaker. A short informative speech on "listening" which included nine relevant jokes was audio tape-recorded in two versions, one in which each joke was punctuated by laughter, and one in which a stony silence greeted each joke. Subjects, 89 university students, heard one of the speech versions and completed four semantic differential scales measuring the following speaker credibility factors: qualification (authoritativeness), safety (character), and dynamism. Subjects also completed a 7-step scale bounded by "good sense of humor" and "poor sense of humor." Results showed that the "successful" speaker received dependably higher ratings on qualification, safety, and dynamism; and that sense of humor ratings favored the successful humor speaker, though not by a statistically significant amount. The speaker in both conditions was rated below the average rating of 4, indicating perhaps that the opposite of "good sense of humor" is "NO sense of humor" rather than "poor sense of humor." (SR)

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"AUDIENCE REACTION TO 'SUCCESSFUL' AND 'UNSUCCESSFUL' HUMOR IN INFORMATIVE DISCOURSE"

Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association's annual
convention, November 19, 1989, San Francisco

by Charles R. Gruner, University of Georgia

Before television, most radio broadcasts were "live," with "live" audiences, whose response could be heard over the air. Sometimes such response disrupted the show. Once, on the quiz show "Take It or Leave It," sponsored by Eversharp ("Write with Eversharp!"), from which came the phrase "The Sixty-Four Dollar Question," a contestant's answer shattered all decorum. The category was "food," and the \$32.00 question for the young male contestant was, "What is the noisy food?" (expected correct answer: celery). The contestant blurted out, "Boston baked beans!" Cast, announcer, and audience burst into raucous laughter that lasted for five minutes. When the announcer/host regained his ability to speak, he yelled, "Young man, you just won your \$64.00!" (the top prize).

On radio comedy shows the previously-"warmed-up" audience was cued as to when to laugh by the "laugh" sign which would light up. But tv could not last for long as a "live" comedy medium; the actors could not sight-read their scripts before a common microphone. Hence the "laugh track" to tell us in TV-land when a line is funny. The "laugh track" has a noble history.

Despite all the words spoken and written about "laugh tracks," a check of the usual sources revealed a dearth of research on the effectiveness of the built-in chuckles.

At humor conferences I am often asked, "What happens when you tell a joke in a speech and no one laughs?" My answer: we don't know: there is no research on it. Thus the present study.

Research on audience response other than laughter (Kelly et al., 1956, Hocking, Margreiter & Hylton, 1977) reveals that positive audience response enhances the evaluations of the sources of the positive responses. It might be, therefore, that positive response to humor in a speech would enhance audience evaluation of the speech/speaker. The present study tested this hypothesis.

Method

Stimuli. A short (4 1/2 mins.) informative speech on "Listening" based upon that used in his dissertation by Kibler (1962) was created, including 9 relevant jokes that had been used in previous studies (e.g., Gruner & Freshley, 1980). The speech was audio tape-recorded twice by a former college speech instructor and amateur actress; in one version each joke was punctuated by laughter (previously recorded on another recorder in a large graduate class); in the other version a stony silence greeted each joke, and the speaker made a non-verbal vocalization indicating dissatisfaction with "no laugh." After the 7th "no laugh," she asked, "Are you there?"

Subjects. In Fall, '89, 1 interpersonal communication class and 1 major empirical communication research class were randomly divided (1,2,1,2, etc.), separated, and exposed to one of the two stimuli. Students in two basic public speaking classes volunteered to participate in a lab setting in 1's, 2's, and 3's outside of class. A coin toss decided which small group heard which stimulus.

Data collection. After hearing one of the speeches, the students completed 4 semantic differential scales measuring each of the following speaker credibility factors: Qualification (authoritativeness), Safety (character), and Dynamism (Berlo *et al.*, 1969), and one 7-step scale bounded by "good sense of humor" and "poor sense of humor." A total of 45 students responded to the "successful" version and 44 responded to the "unsuccessful" version.

Data analysis. "Successful" and "unsuccessful" data were subjected to t-tests, using the SPSSH program in the University's MUSIC computer system.

Results

The "successful" speaker received dependably higher ratings on Qualification (means of 21.09 to 18.95, $t = 3.03$, $p = .003$), Safety (means of 21.09 to 19.68, $t = 2.42$, $p = .018$), and Dynamism (means of 20.6 to 18.14, $t = 3.03$, $p = .003$). Sense of humor ratings favored the successful humor speaker, also, but not by a statistically significant amount (means of 3.91 to 3.38, $t = 1.53$, $p = .129$). The interesting point in these last statistics is that the speaker was rated in both conditions below the average rating of 4; it may be that the opposite of "good sense of humor" is "NO sense of humor," instead of "poor sense of humor."

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